# Sense of Belonging in International Students: Making the Case against Integration to US Institutions of Higher Education

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## Introduction

International student mobility is at an all-time high in recent years, with the United States (US) as the top destination of choice (Institute of International Education 2015). In 2014-2015, the US welcomed 974,926 students at institutions of higher education (Institute of International Education 2015). In that year alone, student mobility to the US increased by 10 percent over the prior year, which is a significant rate of growth. All signs indicate the trend of international student mobility to the US will not abate in upcoming years.

As a result of high student mobility, many US institutions are concerned with how to welcome and transition these students to their campuses. Much of the research and current reports (e.g., Andrade 2006; Rienties, Beausaert, and Grohnert 2012; Ward and Masgoret 2009) on international students tend to focus primarily on their integration to campuses in the US. While the idea of integration appears to be innocuous and harmless, the process of integration often includes the practice of "cultural suicide" (Tierney 1999, p. 82), leading to potential distress and conflict among international students. Thus, I argue that seeking to *integrate* international students through programmatic efforts causes more harm to students' well-being and educational success; rather, the emphasis on fostering international student success should be through increasing students' *sense of belonging*. The case against integration is especially salient for international students in the US because they enter into a unique cultural climate that is heavily influenced by societal and historical forces. Most recently, the racially charged events at institutions such as the University of Missouri-Columbia and Yale University indicate that higher education in the US is in a time of flux, particularly related to differences in culture and backgrounds. Due to the diverse culture of the US, a reconsideration of how we can better transition international students to living and learning at US institutions of higher education is required.

In this essay, I argue that US educators should seek to increase students' sense of belonging rather than their integration to campus, which will provide an effective and culturally sustaining way to help international students' transition. In the following sections, I provide an overview of concept of sense of belonging, including the problems related to integration. I follow that with making a case for using sense of belonging to examine international student experiences. Finally, I offer some suggestions for practice and research on how to conceptualize international students' sense of belonging to campus.

## Sense of Belonging: Effects on Performance and Student Success

Sense of belonging is a construct that influences students' performance and success in college. Within a collegiate context, sense of belonging is important because many students are "inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible" (Strayhorn 2012, p. 10), all of which can influence students' persistence and satisfaction with their collegiate careers. Student success and persistence are at the forefront of student outcomes in college; thus, before a deeper discussion about sense of belonging as a construct, it is important to understand some foundational theories related to student success and persistence.

**Student Integration or Cultural Suicide?**

Discussions of student success and persistence often begin with Tinto's (1993) theory of individual student departure, which he asserted is related to interactions between the student and the rest of the university community. Simply stated, Tinto emphasized the importance of the interactions between individuals and the campus community as students integrate into their social and academic environments, which in turn affects students' likelihood of persisting to graduation. According to Tinto, difficulty in integrating with the campus community often stems from students' inability to separate themselves from their past experiences and challenges with adapting to a new environment. Thus, Tinto argued that the more students integrate into the mainstream social and academic structures of a university, the more likely it is for students to be successful and persist in college.

In order to better integrate with the university, Tinto (1993) proposed that students should voluntarily withdraw from the culture of their previous lives in order to better integrate with their collegiate environment. According to Tinto's model, successful integration requires a full removal from prior groups in order for students to better integrate with their new collegiate environment. However, separation from prior groups could be difficult for students, especially those from different cultures, languages, and countries of origin.

Critics of Tinto's (1993) theory argue that it places full responsibility for integration on the students and does not put enough emphasis on the institution for creating an environment that is supportive and conducive to student interactions and development, particularly for students from historically underrepresented groups (Kuh and Love 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora 2000; Tierney 1992, 1999, 2000). Tierney was particularly vocal against integration because Tinto (1993) implied that underrepresented students must abandon their cultural identities to assimilate to the mainstream campus culture. Tierney (1999) asserted that in order to integrate, racial/ethnic minority students must commit a form of "cultural suicide" (p. 82) or complete separation from

one's culture that can be detrimental to minority students' success in college. Students from underrepresented groups may not ever be able to assimilate into the dominant culture because the pressure to sever ties with one's home culture (i.e., cultural suicide) can have negative influences on students.

However, what are possible outcomes if students cannot assimilate to the dominant peer group? It is unlikely that students from non-dominant groups can integrate to the dominant peer group because of difficulties navigating cultural differences. The issue of integration with a dominant peer culture arose in Berger and Milem's (1999) study that found African-American students had a lower likelihood of persisting through college than White students. Findings from this study suggested that students who had values and norms that were most congruent with the values and norms of the dominant group culture on campus were more likely to persist through college. Conversely, students that were "least like the dominant peer group on campus, particularly with regard to race and political attitudes, were least likely to persist" (Berger and Milem 1999, p. 661). Although Berger and Milem's study is focused on domestic student experiences, the findings are relatable to international students because they too are not a part of the dominant peer group on college campuses.

Overall, integration is not ideal for framing student success and persistence for underrepresented students. Current research on success and persistence (e.g., Astin 1993; Tinto 1993) indicates a lack of attention to students from underrepresented groups, particularly international students. The challenge with using integration as the ultimate measure for student persistence is that "integration can mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education" (Hurtado and Carter 1997, p. 326). Furthermore, a few studies on persistence included international students among their participants. International students have to navigate a brand new culture within their new college campus, all while adjusting to their new outsider status as foreigners in the United States, which makes integration extremely challenging.

The concept of integration for international students is faulty for three reasons. First, the idea of a dominant

peer group wielding the highest level of influence is problematic, particularly when considering the cultural differences that exist between domestic students and international students. Tinto's (1993) theory assumes that international students must assimilate into the culture of the dominant group in order to be successful on campus. The suggestion of assimilation with the dominant culture can be problematic for international students who are very often seen as the "other" on college campuses. Tinto makes the assumption that students in the non-dominant culture can effectively and easily access and infiltrate the dominant cultural group, which may not be as accepting of others who do not fit the dominant groups' norms and attitudes (Kuh and Love 2000).

Second, according to Tinto's (1993) individualist idea of integration, international students must bear the principle burden of responsibility in their transition and integration to the college environment in the US. Thus, the burden of affiliation and integration is placed on the international students rather than sharing this responsibility with other members of the university. In other words, in order to integrate successfully, international students are the ones who must initiate the effort to conform. In this scenario, the institution bears little responsibility for adapting and responding to the needs of diverse student populations.

The third and most important reason for integration as a faulty concept stems from the fact that international students are temporary members of the US. Social integration is more difficult for international students, particularly those from non-Western countries, due to the differences in language and cultural practices. It would be difficult for international students to completely separate from their past and fully integrate when they are temporary visitors who may not be able to fully assimilate into the dominant culture. Additionally, the idea of full integration brings up the question of whether international students *should* fully integrate, and at what cost to their personal well-being?

## The Case for Sense of Belonging

International students are not part of the dominant campus culture due to their different cultural backgrounds and temporary citizenship status. Rather than focusing on integration to the dominant culture, understanding international students' perceptions of membership in a foreign college community could provide insight on the non-dominant student group's feelings of transition to their campus community. In doing so, the emphasis shifts to highlighting the non-dominant group's invisible narrative rather than on the power of the dominant culture.

Feelings of belonging are a basic human need and often serve as motivation for positive behavior (Maslow 1954; Strayhorn 2012). The need to belong and to 'fit in' are a part of human desire to find connection and community with others. Sense of belonging is a concept based on the relational nature of individuals and groups. The need for belonging is particularly relevant for college students who are thrust into a foreign environment with strangers when they attend college.

When applying the construct of sense of belonging to a collegiate setting, sense of belonging is students' "psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community" (Hausmann et a. 2009, p. 650). College students' sense of belonging includes students' perceptions of institutional support and relationships with others, all of which combine to elicit feelings of connectedness and affiliation with the campus community. It is a "cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior" (Strayhorn 2012, p. 3). The resulting feelings of belonging can positively influence students' academic achievement and persistence in college (Hausmann et al. 2007), particularly for students from underrepresented groups (Strayhorn 2012).

Sense of belonging has an association with academic success and motivation, indicating that the psychological aspect of student perception plays a role beyond just socialization. Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) found that students' sense of belonging in their classrooms was associated with academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Additionally, students' sense of

belonging at the university as a whole was strongly associated with their sense of social acceptance, implying that sense of belonging to the university is primarily influenced by social interactions and perception of acceptance by students' peers.

Peers play a critical role in students' sense of belonging because the emphasis is on interpersonal relations. Sense of belonging is a construct that falls within the idea of perceived cohesion, with an emphasis on the perception of group membership. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) described perceived cohesion as "an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group" (p. 482). Sense of belonging encompasses both cognitive and affective aspects. The cognitive level includes information about group experiences, and the affective level reflects the individual's appraisal of group interactions. The combination of both experiences and perceptions of interactions is likely a better predictor of international students' success and positive feelings towards their campus community, because sense of belonging measures feelings of membership in a community rather than measuring integration to a dominant culture, which is difficult for international students to achieve.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Detailed implications for practice are difficult to present because each institution has its own unique culture and practices. Broadly, I recommend that institutions of higher education assess current practices that are intended to assist international students with their transition. Are the current practices culturally sensitive? Do they assume that international students should conform to current university practices, or do they help students understand the cultural and institutional foundations of these practices? Higher education institutions in the United States must examine the current climate on their campus, with an emphasis on understanding international student experiences. In doing so, institutions can understand the unique needs that international students have while living and learning in the United States. Also, institutions can disaggregate the data and information based on country or region of origin for the students, allowing for a better understanding of the nuances related to diverse students' sense of belonging.

Another implication is to consider what exactly is encompassed in sense of belonging in students, especially for those from different cultural backgrounds. As currently defined in the US context, sense of belonging is an individualistic construct that requires self-reflection on one's interactions with other students. Some global cultures tend to be more collectivist in nature than how people in the US typically operate. For example, the cultural differences between Eastern and Western culture are most significant, notably in language, customs, and daily practices (Triandis 2009). Collectivist societies, such as Asian cultures, emphasize interdependence with others, use in-group norms to shape behavior, and view social relationships as a tightly woven community (Hui and Triandis 1986; Triandis 2009). In contrast, individualism is more common in Western culture, as typically found in the United States. Thus, the concept of sense of belonging may need to be adapted to be more inclusive of students who may not come from an individualistic background.

There are compelling reasons that suggest sense of belonging can be reconstructed, or potentially deconstructed, to be more applicable to international students. Perhaps a collective sense of belonging is a more appropriate measure for international students from collectivist societies. This would require measurement of international students' belonging to their individual identity group as a way to connect to the larger campus environment. That is, the idea of collective sense of belonging would focus on connections from individual to subgroup to large group rather than on the measurement of individual to large group connections. Several possibilities for reimagining and reconceptualizing sense of belonging for international students could be developed at individual institutions of higher education to better support overall student success and persistence. Rejecting the notion of integration would increase feelings of membership and sense of belonging in international students. As a result, sense of belonging can influence interna-

tional student success and persistence in a culturally inclusive way, which is lacking in Tinto's (1993) ideas of integration and the resultant cultural suicide.

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